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Southern California gets bad report card on quality of life issues

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

February 4, 2005 -- A six-county region that takes in Riverside County received near-failing grades for transportation, housing and education, in a State of the Region report released Thursday by the Southern California Association of Governments, a regional planning agency.

Poor marks also were issued for the environment and personal income growth. The region's only good marks were in employment, as a result of the six counties adding 14,000 jobs in 2003, and in safety, because the violent crime rate declined 6 percent.

The regional report card, issued in a 123-page analysis, was written for Riverside, Orange, Los Angeles, Ventura, San Bernardino and Imperial counties, a vast area of Southern California home to nearly 18 million people. Riverside County's population is 1.8 million. The association has been grading the region's performance in seven policy areas since 1998. The reports generally lag a year behind conditions, and the new one is based on what happened in 2003.

While conditions vary throughout the region, traffic congestion is a problem across the board, as Southwest Riverside County residents know all too well, said Temecula Councilman Ron Roberts, association president. And, so, it should not come as a surprise that transportation received the worst grade of all: D-.

"Probably the only reason it didn't get an F is because, once you get an F, what do you do the next year when the traffic gets even worse? And it will get worse," Roberts said. "The governor has taken all of our Proposition 42 funds and there is just no money for transportation."

The state funding drought is disheartening when set against the backdrop of Riverside County's 3.4 percent growth in 2003, highest among California counties.

"We've been playing catch-up for so many years," Roberts said of road construction. "Projects don't get funded and every year we get further behind. It looks like we'll never catch up."

The construction slowdown has done nothing to ease congestion that led residents of Riverside and San Bernardino counties to sit in traffic an average of 57 hours per year, fifth worst among the nation's metropolitan areas. Riverside County commuters drive on average 31 minutes one way to work, tops among area counties.

Another factor in the low transportation grade was the region's 1,815 traffic fatalities in 2003, an increase of 8 percent, the report stated. It was the largest year-to-year increase since 1995. The sharp uptick was alarming because, for the rest of California, there was almost no change, the report said. The national total actually fell 1 percent, to 42,643 deaths.

Roberts, a former California Highway Patrol officer, attributed the region's increase to growing carelessness on the highway, particularly among younger drivers, and budget problems that have prevented the state from hiring more officers.

"I see speeds going up tremendously," he said. "It's just amazing, with the amount of traffic we have, how fast people continue to drive."

The region received a straight D for housing, which continues to be in short supply and priced out of reach for many families despite torrid construction. More than 78,000 homes were built in 2003, the report stated. Still, that was well below the pace of the late 1980s, when as many as 130,000 homes were framed in a single year.

Well more than half the region's new housing is being built in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, even though the inland area has just one-fifth of the region's population.

The lopsided balance between supply and demand held the region's home ownership rate constant at 55 percent, even as the statewide rate increased to 59 percent and the national rate edged up to 68 percent.

"Temecula and Murrieta used to be two cities with affordable housing," Roberts said. "We're out of the market now. You've got to go to Hemet, San Jacinto, and even Beaumont and Banning now, to find affordable housing."

In other areas, the report issued grades of:

- D for education. In 2003, the region's eighth-graders continued to perform below the national average in reading and math.
- C- for environment. A particularly hot-and-smoggy summer of 2003 brought the grade down. But the region was praised for its water conservation. Residents use only a little more water than they did in 1990, despite 2.3 million people having moved in since then.
- C- for personal income. Job wage increases barely kept pace with inflation.
- B for employment. After losing 21,000 jobs in 2002, the region added a net 14,000 jobs in 2003. Riverside and San Bernardino counties performed better than other areas, adding 24,000 jobs. Even so, Riverside County's unemployment rate was 6.1 percent, and across the region only Los Angeles and Imperial counties posted worse rates.
- B in safety. Violent crime declined by 6 percent region-wide from 2002 to 2003.

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